

THE REPLACEMENT CHEF

螞蟻上樹

A sous chef and a private investigator find themselves irrevocably brought together by the murder of a TV host and a model's sudden disappearance. A police investigation only turns up more questions, but one thing is certain: everything has to do with a simple Chinese dish called "Ants Climb a Tree".

Chueh I-tao is more than he lets himself appear to be. Though a master of culinary art with a keen sense of taste, he carries a secret that keeps him hiding in subordinate positions – until one day when he's forced to oversee the kitchen, and a celebrity television host orders something not on the menu: a simple stir-fry dish called "Ants Climb a Tree".

The host is eating lunch with a beautiful but quite unknown young model. Yet she is not alone: private eye and ex-police student Ting Hsiao-hsia is tailing her on behalf of her jealous boyfriend. When the host orders a dish not on the menu, Ting suspects something's not right. But when the host turns up dead that evening and the model goes missing, that suspicion is confirmed.

The narrative shifts from Chueh I-tao to Ting Hsiao-hsia's perspective as the case brings the two together, and the careful reader will discover how seemingly meaningless details from their unjoined narratives can crystallize into threads of evidence. Everything comes down to one unremarkable dish that somehow ties memories and secrets together like pork and scallions in glass noodles.

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Chapter One: Chueh I-tao Watches a Commercial for Ants Climb a Tree

1

Chueh I-tao steps through the window into the room, staggers, and almost falls.

I-tao uses this route whenever he goes out late at night to fool around with friends, although he didn't discover it. When he was in third grade, he and his father went shopping at the market one summer afternoon. They returned home loaded with plastic grocery bags. At their front door, his father realized he had forgotten his keys. His solution was to squeeze into the fire escape alley alongside the house, where he did a kind of vertical crabwalk to the second floor, pressing his feet against their house's wall and his back against the neighbors' wall. Then he pulled himself over the wall's protruding lip with both hands, hooked his left leg over the second-floor railing, flipped himself onto the balcony, and opened the second-floor window. I-tao stood in front of the rolling steel door on the ground floor and watched as his father took off his shoes, lifted one leg, and stepped through the window. Moments later, the steel door rose with a metallic rasp, and his father, panting slightly, stood in the gloom behind it.

"Don't tell your mom." His father grinned, then turned serious. "And don't go climbing up there the way I did." I-tao nodded.

"Bring in the food." When his father turned, I-tao saw a layer of grime across his back, where his shirt had rubbed against the wall. "I need to wash this shirt before your mom gets home."

His mother never found out about the incident, and his father never forgot his keys again. I-tao, however, developed an obsession with this new way in and out of the house and tried it a number of times on the sly. His legs weren't long enough, but he had plenty of guts. I-tao's thought process was a simple one: The second-floor balcony was connected to his bedroom, and having a secret route was fun. He didn't anticipate the endless pleasures of staying out all night with the crowd he discovered a few years later, nor did he expect this route to become his way in and out on these occasions.

He doesn't know how many times he's been through this window, but this is the first time he's lost his footing.

I-tao knows it's because today is the first time he and his friends chugged beer with a total disregard for limits.

That's why the climb left him panting. That's why he stumbled.

But there's something else not right tonight.

His bedroom door is ajar, light from the living room leaking into his room around it.

Did his mom and dad come in and discover he snuck out? I-tao tiptoes to the door to check. The living room light is on, but his parents aren't there.

I-tao lets out his breath, yanks off the old T-shirt he got dirty climbing the wall, crosses the living room, and ducks into the bathroom. He drank too much beer. His bladder is about to explode.

He relieves himself, a lengthy operation that leaves him feeling more sober. Still nobody in the living room, and no light visible under the master bedroom door. Looks like his parents are already asleep and just forgot to turn off the living room lights. I-tao turns off the main light and goes back into his bedroom. It's when he turns on his room's overhead light that he suddenly notices several marks on the floor.

He blinks and looks again.

Shoe prints.

The fine hair on the back of his neck stands on end.

The reason something didn't feel right a moment before wasn't because the door to his room was ajar or because the living room light was on. It was because of an odor.

I-tao has a very sensitive nose. His father considers it the one hereditary advantage he passed on to his son. It also qualifies I-tao to carry on their trade.

His father likes to say that I-tao's brain has a built-in odor database. He can accurately distinguish subtle differences between odors effortlessly, moving from analysis to comparison and classification without thought. Just as he did the instant he detected the strange odor in his bedroom.

I-tao knows it isn't the shoe prints that are making his skin crawl. He recognizes that smell.

He shuts his eyes, thinks *calm down, try to listen*.

The room is quiet. He can hear the thumping of his alcohol-fueled heart, the humming of the downstairs freezer's big compressor.

Other than that, nothing.

I-tao takes a deep breath to steady his emotions, but this just makes him feel like he's inhaling even more of that troubling odor. He turns slowly. Very gently, he pushes open the door of his room. He makes a circuit of the living room and moves toward the stairs to the ground floor.

Then he woke up.

2

He hadn't dreamed about it for a while now. I-tao knew he could never forget it, so he had long since mastered the many complex emotions the incident triggered – the pain, anxiety, helplessness, hatred – by locking them in an inner corner of himself, never to be touched. He also knew he could do nothing about the dream that kept taking him back to that night, that he was as powerless now as when he went downstairs and saw what had happened.

Overthinking did no good.

I-tao raised his right hand. Confirmed it wasn't shaking. Sat up, got out of bed, stretched. Then he conscientiously did his morning exercises before he went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, wash his face, and carefully scrape stubble from his chin in the mirror.

He turned on the TV in the living room. Then he went into the kitchen, where he made porridge with leftover rice and some of the stock cubes he kept in the freezer.

A pot of homemade stock left to cool, then frozen and cut into small cubes was a convenient way to make all sorts of dishes. I-tao looked in the freezer. Not much left of this batch; he'd have to find time to make another in the next couple of days. He made a mental note to put *buy stock ingredients* on his to-do list. He heard the morning news anchor start to talk about the latest food safety crisis, the hot topic of the past two weeks.

"Master Chao" was Taiwan's biggest food brand, manufacturing everything and anything you could possibly want in the way of convenience foods, from small packages of dry ramen to a wide variety of foods in microwaveable packages. The brand also operated a chain of big supermarkets and a variety of restaurants, with branches all over the country.

Recently, a problem had occurred with Master Chao's Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree, one of the brand's convenience foods. I-tao hadn't tried this particular product line; he didn't actually eat convenience food very often, though over the past few years he'd eaten some every now and then just to try a particular flavor. He knew most of it added tons of artificial flavoring and too much seasoning, but then again, if people chose it because it was fast, easy, and cheap, or just because they thought it tasted better, he had nothing against it.

Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree contained a package of mung bean noodles and a sauce pouch. You threw both into boiling water to cook for three minutes, took them out, mixed them together, and *voila*, you had Ants Climb a Tree. This convenient version of the dish from Master Chao, which could be served as an entrée or a side, was a huge hit. Take-out junkies had another choice, and mothers who did double duty as working women and housewives added it to their dining tables.

A couple of weeks earlier, food poisoning cases had cropped up at several medical clinics. They were thought to be unrelated until a few days later, when someone discovered all of the patients had eaten Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree. At this point, government authorities and the public sat up and took notice.

Now under investigation for food safety violations, the culinary team for Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree had a definite problem.

The Master Chao Corporation stated that their manufacturing process for the product absolutely followed regulations. The Executive Yuan's Office of Food Safety, which coordinated with multiple departments, likewise asserted that the product had passed all relevant inspections before it was put on the market. However, due to pressure from public opinion, Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree would be temporarily pulled from the shelves of all major retail outlets and reinspected. Other products from that line would also be tested.

Still in the kitchen, I-tao heard the news anchor say that Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree was back on shelves after passing inspection. In addition, while reviewing pre-investigation surveillance footage from its supermarkets, the Master Chao Corporation had discovered a shady-looking man in a baseball cap lurking in front of the shelf where the product was located.

As a result, the Master Chao Corporation thought the man might have used a syringe or similar tool to inject poison into the food pouches. This meant Master Chao products were not the problem. Someone had deliberately caused this food safety incident.

As for what had motivated the criminal, that was currently unknown.

I-tao carried his rice porridge into the living room. A PR representative for Master Chao was on now, responding to questions. He stated that the surveillance footage had already been given to police, and that the company would fully cooperate in the investigation and arrest of the criminal who had damaged the brand's reputation.

The spokesperson wore a suit and had slicked back hair. I-tao thought he looked familiar, and then the subtitles confirmed it was Li Jen, a former classmate. He was older than I-tao, but they had trained at the same time.

They hadn't been in touch for years. Huh. He'd evidently joined the ranks of white-collar workers. Just as I-tao felt the first twinges of nostalgia, Li Jen's segment ended and the big face of Legislator Chiu Chiao appeared. Chiu Chiao headed the Committee on Food Safety. He had made frequent appearances on news channels in the past two weeks but said virtually the same thing every time, with heavy and repeated emphasis on his intention of keeping a close watch on food safety. I-tao could never figure out what this "close watch" actually entailed. Chiu was obviously giving his media exposure a boost prior to the upcoming elections.

I-tao didn't have a whole lot of patience when it came to politicians giving statements. Fortunately, the program immediately went to a commercial.

3

Ink-black background, majestic music, a downward spotlight, and then Chao Tung Yuan appeared, dressed as a master chef.

"I'm Chao Tung Yuan, and I run the Master Chao company. I used to be a chef. My food is delicious, nutritious, and absolutely problem-free." Chao's voice was deep and powerful. "I'm still a chef. You can trust me. I am Master Chao."

This ad must have been filmed after the safety issues surfaced. I-tao knew Chao had been a chef before becoming a food mogul but wasn't all that sure he still worked in the kitchen. As though the commercial were responding to I-tao's doubts, the scene changed to Chao standing behind a kitchen work surface. He picked up a hunk of pork and put it on a cutting board.

The camera cut to a close-up, and Chao began mincing the meat at high speed.

The ad made several jump cuts as Chao prepared Ants Climb a Tree and then set the finished dish on the table. The final scene was Chao, cupped hands resting palms out on his spectacular waist, and a package of Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree that took up half the screen. The caption read, “The craftsmanship of Master Chao, the pleasure of well-being.”

I-tao knew convenience foods didn’t come out looking like that, but the ad intrigued him: If Chao Tung Yuan didn’t cook with pre-ground meat, it showed he really did insist on his method when it came to the taste of Ants Climb a Tree.

Some people thought Ants Climb a Tree was just mung bean vermicelli stir-fried with ground meat, but there were actually a lot of ways to make it. The mung bean noodles could be boiled or stir-fried. The ground meat could be cooked with the noodles, or cooked with the sauce before the noodles were stirred in. Those with higher standards gave a bit more care to the sauce. More slapdash cooks might use a can of spicy pre-ground meat, which worked just fine. If you really wanted to put in the time and effort, though, the meat was the key.

Using pre-ground meat wasn’t really a problem, but if you minced the pork yourself, the sauce permeated every nook and cranny when you stir-fried the meat, and every mouthful was made that much more delicious. Mincing the meat yourself also required extensive training in knife skills and a good knife.

I-tao thought the knife in the commercial was too flashy. It looked nice, and it moved well as it cut up the meat. It would likely tempt people if put in a store display. But he would bet the knife wasn’t well-balanced when you were actually using it. I-tao had also noticed the prominent knuckles and blue veins on the hands chopping the meat. When Chao Tung Yuan had rested his hands on his waist, his palms were thick and fleshy. So regardless of whether Chao still worked in the kitchen or not, it wasn’t him using the knife in the commercial.

It seemed ironic for Chao to stress that he was a chef but have a stand-in film the cooking scenes.

Still, because there would always be someone who needed this kind of thing, I-tao had a job.

He turned off the TV and went back into the kitchen. A cleaver hung from a rack above the kitchen counter.

The blade appeared well maintained and gleamed slightly, although years of use and cleaning had changed the color of the handle.

I-tao contemplated the knife. He closed his eyes as he respectfully and solemnly murmured a few words. Then he took the knife hanging next to it.

He had carefully sharpened and wiped this knife the night before. Even so, he now inspected the blade’s edge in the light. Holding the knife lightly by the handle, he verified the weight of it in his hand, then slid it into a leather sheath.

I-tao put on pants and a T-shirt, buckled the sheath onto his belt horizontally at the small of his back, then put on a shirt over it. One by one, he made sure all the windows were securely fastened. He double-checked the money in his wallet and the work clothes in his travel pack.

Everything was good to go.
I-tao nodded and opened the door.

Chapter Two: Ting Hsiao-hsia Hums the Song “Last to Bloom, the Roseleaf Bramble”

1

Ting Hsiao-hsia parked her scooter, and almost burned herself on the exhaust pipe.

She went into the convenience store and took a can of iced coffee from the shelf. As she paid for it, she looked out the door, thinking about the many years she had owned the scooter. Bought the summer after she tested into the police academy, its white body dazzlingly bright, she hopped on the moment her name was on the title. Resisting the impulse to sing her happiness aloud, she gently pressed the accelerator. The scooter rocked, and she heard something smack onto the ground behind her.

The white helmet the scooter shop had given her, which she had set behind her on the seat, lay teetering on the concrete. The scooter shop’s junior apprentice stifled a laugh and picked it up for her, then grabbed a clean cloth and wiped the helmet with a gallant flourish; she thanked him as he handed it over. If you ignored the scratch on it, it still gleamed.

Her mother was sure to be at her again when she got home, complaining about how reckless she always was; Hsiao-hsia smiled wryly, then tried to comfort herself: *Doesn’t matter, Mom ought to be used to it by now, just like I’m used to her nagging.*

Hsiao-hsia had grown up in a single parent home. Ting was her mother’s surname. She had never met her father, and her mother never talked about him. Her mother was a nurse, gentle and quiet with an elegant bearing. She was always calm, even during her busiest periods at the hospital.

When she was little, Hsiao-hsia used to imagine what kind of person her father was and what he looked like. Out of her many fantasies, the one she liked best was her father as a handsome, fiery-tempered gang member who met her mother in the emergency room after a gang conflict. He had fallen helplessly in love, then vanished without a trace after taking on another of the gang’s operations.

Hsiao-hsia knew her mother wished she could be like her, that she hoped Hsiao-hsia would turn into a calm, gentle girl, marry a man with a steady job and decent income, then produce a picture-perfect happy family. Unfortunately, Hsiao-hsia also knew, despite her girlish, over-the-top romantic fantasies about her parents’ past, that her restless, high-energy personality made it very hard for her to be the kind of daughter her mother had in mind.

While in elementary school, Hsiao-hsia gave in to her mother’s pressure and took ballet classes, but at the start of the second term she secretly used the tuition money to sign up for the children’s Taekwondo class instead. In high school, Hsiao-hsia gave in and registered for the regular university exam. She deliberately tested poorly, however, then told her mother she had not only taken the police academy exam as well, but had met the qualifications for admission.

Every time her mother learned the truth, she would throw a fit until Hsiao-hsia's innocent little kid act disarmed her. Actually, Hsiao-hsia knew that as long as she was clearly resolved on her course of action, her mother would become her staunch supporter in the end, even if it wasn't what she wanted for her. Besides, Hsiao-hsia considered her own dogged determination something she got from her mother, who had raised her alone while doing shift work as a nurse, with overtime the norm. Hanging tough was a necessity.

Riding her new scooter home, Hsiao-hsia was struck by sudden inspiration. She made a detour into a stationery shop and chose a sticker large enough to cover the scratch on the helmet.

When she got back to the apartment building where she and her mother lived, Hsiao-hsia took the helmet in with her. Her mother heard her come in the front door and called out to her from the kitchen, first to ask how it felt to ride her new scooter, then giving her a lecture on safety. She came out of the kitchen wiping her hands and saw the helmet Hsiao-hsia had set on the shoe cabinet by the door.

"SpongeBob SquarePants?" Her mother pointed at the sticker on the helmet. "I didn't know you liked SpongeBob."

"The scooter shop puts those on all the helmets they give away." She stuck out her tongue.

"It's crooked." Her mother picked up the helmet and gave it a closer look.

"The guy at the scooter shop wasn't very good at that part." Hsiao-hsia silently apologized to the junior apprentice who had picked up the helmet for her.

"Oh?" Face stern, her mother's eyes danced as she said, "You're an adult now. Don't be so reckless. I want to find a time to start teaching you how to cook. What's a girl who doesn't know how to cook going to do when she's on her own?"

Thinking back on it now, maybe when her mother said "on her own," it was some sort of premonition.

During her second semester at the police academy, someone vandalized Hsiao-hsia's brand new scooter. The helmet with the SpongeBob SquarePants sticker disappeared at the same time. Hsiao-hsia found it that night in a corner of the school's bathroom, reeking of urine, the lining slashed like flesh scored by a whip.

The next day, Hsiao-hsia dropped out of the academy.

A few days after that, her mother died.

2

Hsiao-hsia had pushed the vandalized scooter to the scooter shop. Because she didn't want to worry her mother, she planned to hide the repairs from her. As it happened, the hospital was short on staff just then; her mother, already promoted to a managerial position, had naturally volunteered to take a night shift. She wouldn't know if Hsiao-hsia got home late.

“What the hell did you do to it?” The scooter shop’s junior apprentice frowned as he looked it over. “You’re gonna have to shell out some cash.”

“Leave everything that’s still usable. Swap out anything that’s a total loss.” Hsiao-hsia sighed, silently calculating her savings. “I can’t spend much, so I need to cut costs where I can.”

“But the frame’s out of alignment.” The junior apprentice raised the scooter on the lift and pointed at its underside. “Riding around on it like this is dangerous.”

“As long as it looks okay, it’s fine. I’ll be extra careful.” Hsiao-hsia sighed again, then fished around in her back pack and pulled out a SpongeBob SquarePants sticker. “Oh, and I need a white helmet.”

The splintered side of the scooter’s shell was swapped out for a new one. The other side was cracked but still sound enough for the junior apprentice to do a temporary patch with glue. “It’s going to vibrate when you ride it,” the apprentice told Hsiao-hsia. “So the glue won’t hold for long. Come in and replace it when you get a chance.”

The repaired scooter pulled to one side, but fortunately her mother never rode scooters, so she probably wouldn’t find out.

The scooter was a minor problem. The police academy’s notice of expulsion was a major one.

When Hsiao-hsia was called into the principal’s office, she still wasn’t a hundred percent sure. All doubt disappeared when she was handed the notice. Naturally, she knew the reason for expulsion written at the top of the notice was false, just as she knew right away that the destruction of her scooter was a warning to keep her mouth shut. She hadn’t wanted to let the scooter incident go at first, but this follow-up made the other party’s better connections and greater influence clear. If Hsiao-hsia decided to fight back, she would undoubtedly be in for a lot more hassle, which would make it pretty much impossible not to involve her mother.

Forget it. Better not to add to her mother’s worries. In any case, the school hadn’t made even a basic inquiry or investigation. The situation was obvious, so there was nothing to keep her there. Hsiao-hsia didn’t say anything. She took the notice, went back to the classroom, got her back pack, and immediately left the school.

Over the next few days, Hsiao-hsia was still up and out the door every morning bright and early, but her destination wasn’t the academy. She went to every cram school on Cram School Street and took every demo class for a university exam prep course that she could find.

When she first gave up on regular university for the police academy, she believed a police unit was a better place to develop herself, but her experience at the academy suggested that everything she thought she knew about society was just a bunch of wishful thinking. She decided to spend a few months working hard in a prep course, then retake the university entrance exam. She would keep her mother in the dark for as long as possible, then come clean when she couldn’t hide her situation any longer. If she told her now, she thought her mother would probably head straight to the academy to demand justice from the principal, but Hsiao-hsia didn’t want that to happen.

Because entering the police academy had been her choice, she should be the one to clean up the mess. Besides, her mother had plenty to deal with already. If Hsiao-hsia retook the test and got into a university before she explained, her mother would probably just grumble for a bit, then let it go.